

Six Steps to a Really Good Theory of Knowledge Essay

Modified from Eileen Dombrowski

STEP 1

Select a Title from the List



Do not instantly seize upon a title that sounds appealing and plunge into it headlong. Instead, read carefully all titles (that is, all topics of questions) on the list. Which one allows you to demonstrate best your understanding of ToK issues and your own critical skills? Remember that you may not change the title to something else that you wish you had been asked, but must respond to the title exactly as given.

What are the key words or concepts?

Are there key words of the Theory of Knowledge course – words such as 'belief', 'knowledge', 'truth', 'knowledge issues' or 'justification?' Are you clear about what they mean? Are you aware of ambiguities in meaning, or of possible alternative meanings? Check back on class notes, and give these words some thought.

Are there other words or concepts in the title that need clarification? How will you clarify these words or concepts?

How are the key concepts related to each other? Put the title into your own words to make sure you understand what is being asked.

STEP 2

Read the Instructions and the Assessment Criteria



DO NOT SKIP THIS STEP. DO NOT SKIP THIS STEP. DO NOT EVEN THINK ABOUT SKIPPING THIS STEP.

Read the general instructions for the essay. AND read the essay title you've chosen: what are the key words?

Pay attention to the details.

If you are told to 'assess' or 'evaluate' a claim, then you are supposed to consider the arguments both for and against it, taking into account any ambiguities in interpreting it. Possible responses, for example:

- *That the claim is justified in these ways or up to this point, but not justified in those ways or beyond that point.*
- *That whether or not the claim is justified depends on what is meant by one of its key words or concepts, so that if you take one version of the key word the claim is justified, but if you take a different version it is not.*
- *That, although some justification can be offered for this point of view, the claim is really an oversimplification and misrepresentation.*

If you are asked 'to what extent' or 'in what way' a statement is justified, then you are being asked the same thing, but in different words.

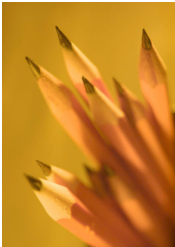
If you are being asked a question directly, your response must still take the same approach of considering to what extent or in what ways you consider the answer to be yes or no.

Remember to center your essay on knowledge issues and, where appropriate, refer to other parts of your IB program and to experiences as a knower. Always justify your statements and provide relevant examples to illustrate your arguments, and remember to consider what can be said against them. If you use external sources (and it is recommended), cite them using MLA formatting.

Read the assessment criteria. Pay attention to the description of the top mark in each category in order to set your goals for an appropriate essay.

STEP 3

Gather Your Ideas



- (a) Read your title and start to identify the knowledge issues which it raises. Are you clear in your mind what a 'knowledge issue' is? If not, re-read the explanation:

*Knowledge issues are questions that directly refer to our understanding of the world, ourselves and others, in connection with the acquisition, search for, production, shaping and acceptance of knowledge. These issues are intended to open to inquiry and exploration not only **problems** but also **strengths** of knowledge. **Knowledge issues can reveal how knowledge can be a benefit, a gift, a pleasure and a basis for further thought and action, just as they can uncover the possible uncertainties, biases in approach, or limitations relating to knowledge, ways of knowing, and the methods of verification and justification appropriate in different areas of knowledge.***

Do not treat an area of knowledge as somehow inferior if there are numerous difficulties which it faces in trying to gain knowledge

What are the knowledge issues that I can see in the title I've chosen? What should I discuss?

- ?
- ?
- ?

(b) Think about how the knowledge issues raised by your title are relevant to different Areas of Knowledge and Ways of Knowing. Do all cultures see these issues the same way? What comparisons can you draw, what general conclusions do you reach, and what arguments can be made against those conclusions? Can you find examples to illustrate your points? Note down your ideas quickly, without trying yet to structure them. Write until your mind runs dry. It will.

What Ways of Knowing and Areas of Knowledge are relevant? Which ones are the best to discuss here?

Think broadly, drawing the comparisons and links between Ways and Areas. Try drawing lines between parts of the ToK Diagram and think of connections that your title suggests. Think about the people who are *doing* the knowing, and about different cultural views.



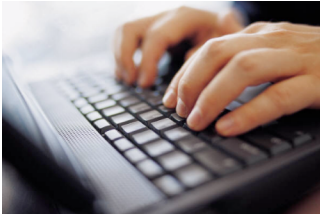
(c) Now enrich your immediate ideas by going back over notes from your ToK course to remind yourself of class discussions and material which are relevant to your title. Gather examples to illustrate your points from notes and texts from your other IB courses, the newspaper, people you know, your own experience, or any other relevant sources. Remember, though, that the ToK essay is not a research paper. You will not find your response to the title in a book; books and other sources give you only the raw material which you must shape into your own response.



(d) If time allows, you may want to live with your ideas floating in your mind for a few days or so at this point, gathering more ideas as thoughts hit you in class, your community service activities, or elsewhere. This step of gathering ideas is often challenging – and extremely enjoyable. It is a chance to engage your own mind in considering the central ToK question: "How do I know?" If you find ideas at all interesting or like to reflect on what beliefs or knowledge your life experience and education have given you, you will probably find this stage of the essay personally stimulating. Moreover, you will be given credit in your essay for pulling together the relevant ideas in a way which reflects your own thinking and draws illustrations of ideas not only from public facts and explanations but also from your own life experience.

STEP 4

Organize Your Ideas in Preparation for Writing



Now comes probably the greatest struggle of the essay – to move from scribbled notes of intertwined ideas to a plan for an essay which lays out (one, two, three!) a sequence of arguments which respond clearly to the title. If you find this step difficult, remember that no one is born (as far as I know!) already knowing how to write an essay. It takes concentration and practice to learn to swim, to tango...or to organize ideas for an essay. Allow yourself only a few minutes to wai "But I **can't**..." and then settle down to try.

As you put your ideas into related groups and shuffle them into order, you should identify your **THESIS** – that is, the central point which you want to make in your essay. Distil it into a single sentence to write at the top of your plan. Make sure that every subsection of your essay develops this core idea in some way, including considering counter-arguments to it. If any ideas you gathered in step 3 are not actually relevant to the title, force yourself to cut them out of your plan no matter how much you like them.

There are many possible ways of structuring ideas in an essay, depending on the topic. For example,

- You might develop three reasons for accepting a particular conclusion, then counter them with four stronger reasons for rejecting it and accepting a different one;
- You might compare two areas of knowledge by developing first what they have in common and then how they differ in the terms of the title;
- You might consider a series of possible approaches to knowing and reflect upon the problems and the strengths inherent in each in turn in the context given by the title.

THERE IS NO FORMULA FOR A PERFECT PLAN. The only thing essential is that the sequence of ideas as you move from subsection to subsection in the body of your essay must develop your thesis, which in turn must respond to the set title.

STEP 5

Write the Essay



By now you have done extensive thinking and planning – but you still have no essay! The actual writing, though, is only a small part of a good essay if you have prepared well it should be straightforward. Keep the following points in mind as you write and revise your draft:

- Keep your thesis in front of you at all times to keep your mind focused on your central argument. Write it on a large piece of paper and tape it above your desk or computer screen.
- The assessment criteria favor a concise introduction, one which establishes your topic and sets out your thesis, but does not go on and on for hundreds of words. In your first draft, you may want to just write *only your thesis* as the introduction and get on with your argument. You can come back at the end to write a great opening.
- Try to develop ideas in proportion to their importance in your overall plan. You'll need to control the degree to which you expand on an idea as you go.
- You are expected to clarify concepts as you go, defining terms if necessary. However,
 - Do not, pad out your essay with definitions of terms which are not particularly ambiguous.
 - Do not drop into your essay lumps of definition which have nothing to do with your argument and are ignored thereafter.
 - Do not, above all, use a dictionary definition to bypass complexities: no teacher or examiner will be impressed if, after a course in which you discuss possible understandings of 'truth' or 'knowledge,' you 'solve' this problem of knowledge by plunking down a citation from Webster's as if you have thereby settled the matter!
- Select your examples from a wide variety of sources and cultures. Make sure, too, that they really do illustrate your point. For example, a reference to the Copernican Revolution and Galileo might illustrate a change in beliefs, but it does not demonstrate an understanding of revolutions in thinking within science; what came before was not 'science' according to contemporary definition.
- Be careful with an example to make sure that you understand the science or math or history etc. well enough that you are being accurate. Your reader may will be very informed in that topic and you don't want to be showing ignorance. READ to solve this problem.
- Avoid examples which are used so often in ToK essays around the world that the examiner will yawn (the point is to be original and insightful – not just copy):
 - Don't use Galileo at all unless he is unusually relevant.
 - Don't use Inuit words for snow as your example to illustrate anything about language – unless you speak the language yourself. Come up with something more personal to YOU.
 - Don't use dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima as an example of a moral dilemma.
 - Don't use $2+2=4$ to illustrate logical/mathematics reasoning ... it's trivial.

- *Don't use Hitler as an example of evil.*
 - *Don't say that people used to think the world was flat.*
- *You are welcome to use "I" in a ToK essay. If you are speaking about your own experiences or beliefs you probably will want to do so.*
- *But be careful! This is not simply a paper about your own opinions and beliefs. You must address knowledge issues objectively.*
- *Check your facts. Are your assertions accurate? Identify sources.*
- *Polish the essay as you finish writing. Check for sentence errors which could interfere with the clarity of language and argument.*
- **READ YOUR ESSAY MANY TIMES BEFORE YOU CALL IT DONE!!!** *Read for spelling and grammar errors, read for the logic of your argument, read for good examples, read for organization, read for the flow of the essay. **AT LEAST ONE READING SHOULD BE DONE OUT LOUD!!! – DOES YOUR WRITING MAKE SENSE?***
- *Read your essay with the assessment criteria in hand. Many students simply neglect to put in counterarguments or neglect to put in sources. It's silly to earn a low score by just not doing something that the criteria says you need to.*

STEP 6

Hand it in – and Celebrate!



A good theory of knowledge essay does demand that you think deeply about questions of truth which thread themselves through all areas of your life. If you have done your personal best to take a significant question of knowledge and make it your own, you have achieved a goal central to your International Baccalaureate – and potentially important in the growth of your own thinking. And not only that you should feel as if you gained new insights in examining the question. Congratulations!